Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 2: Immigration and Disability

Guests: Michelle Garcia and Alicia Contreras

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey, friends! It's me, Alice Wong, the host of the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media.

In June 2017, I attended a conference hosted by the National Coalition for Latinxs with Disabilities in Berkeley, California. By the way, if you're wondering what "Latinx" means, it's a gender-neutral term often used instead of Latino or Latina, with an "X."

At that conference, there was a panel titled *Fear, Family, and Deportation: The Impact of Immigration Policies Under the New Administration*. I learned a lot from it.

Undocumented people have always been invisible, and there's little known or written about undocumented disabled people. While immigrants come from every corner of the globe, today's episode will focus on disabled Latinx immigrants and what they're experiencing right now. Joining me are two panelists from that conference: Michelle Garcia and Alicia Contreras.

Michelle Garcia is the Latino Community Development Organizer at Access Living, a disability rights organization in Chicago. She's also the organizer of Cambiando Vidas, a group specifically for Latinxs with disabilities in Chicago.

Alicia Contreras is the Executive Director of the East Bay Spanish Speaking Citizens' Foundation located in Oakland, California that provides resources on citizenship and immigration for the Latino community and other services.

Please note there are some technical issues with the sound in this episode. [bell rings] Also, these conversations happened before the announcement by the Trump administration on September 5th, 2017 on their decision to end DACA, also known as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. [bell rings]

Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

ALICE: OK, so, Alicia, tell me a little bit about yourself.

ALICIA CONTRERAS: Well, I was born in Mexico. I got polio when I was one year and a half, and I was very lucky because I had very progressive parents. I was able to have pretty much every normal, standard childhood go to school, get a Bachelor's degree, and that opened up different opportunities. And then, I had an opportunity to come to the U.S., and I opened my eyes to a whole world as a disability advocate.

I was working for more than 20 years in the disability world, but then, there was opportunity to be an advocate in the Latino community. So, that's what I'm doing now, since two years ago.

[mellow acoustic guitar]

ALICE: And thank you too, Michelle, for joining us. Why don't you tell us a little bit about who you are and your background?

MICHELLE GARCIA: OK, sure. So, I am originally from El Paso, Texas. Part of my life, I grew up in Texas. Part of it, I grew up in Mexico. My mother is from Mexico. My father was from New York. So, I experienced back and forth between here in the States and then in Mexico my whole life. As part of my work, I became an activist while I was in college, and I got involved with ADAPT. And then, they opened up the position for the Latino Community Organizing, and three months later, it's very much head-on working and growing in Chicago and in Illinois.

ALICE: Tell me about some of your work with the Disabled Latinx Community at Access Living in Chicago.

MICHELLE: I organize a group of Latinos with disabilities, and we work around issues of immigration, health care, access to housing. We've done a lot of work on ADA stuff because unfortunately, being that Chicago is quite an old city, so that many businesses and contexts for housing are not accessible. So, we've been doing this ongoing campaign for access, including hospitals and grocery stories, etc. And then, something that we've been largely impacted by is immigration issues because like 95% of the group is people who are undocumented. So, they're Latino undocumented people with disabilities. For them, having no access to services because of their lack of status is a huge issue.

ALICE: Alicia, you're the Executive Director of the Spanish Speaking Citizens' Foundation located in the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland, California, which does all kinds of work with housing and immigration. Tell me more about the work that you're doing in the Latinx community.

ALICIA: Absolutely, yes. Housing is a big, big issue. Right now, as you probably have heard, the Latino community--as many other communities who are low-income--are being displaced from Oakland. The Fruitvale community still feels very much Hispanic, and there are more than us who have been present more than 50 years serving the Latino community. There's La Clínica, and there is the Unity Counsel. There are many organizations that have been trying to help people to stay and participate in the Fruitvale community.

The current administration's attack on multiple-marginalized communities

ALICE: What are your thoughts on the current administration's attack on multiple-marginalized communities, such as disabled immigrants?

ALICIA: Well, it seems like the new administration is kind of like in the times when Hitler wanted the perfect body, the perfect everything. And when you don't fit in that profile, of course, you're not welcome. So, it seems like really this administration would like to get rid of anyone who

costs money to the government. And the definition of who costs money to the government, as you and I know, can be seen from many different perspectives. But it seems like people forget that actually migrants are paying taxes and are doing all the things that they're doing.

ALICE: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Well, would you be willing to share your own immigration story and path to citizenship?

ALICIA: In my case, I was very lucky that I had an organization that sponsored me to come to the U.S. So, I came with a visa, a work visa. That is not the case of many immigrants. So, having said that I was very lucky that I had the visa, that put me in a small group of people who are lucky to come with a visa and enter the country legally and have a chance to work with a work permit. So, some of the people we serve are in that situation, and some others are not. One of the things that I like to point out when I have an interview is that many people don't know that actually entering illegally in the country is not a crime. So, that's where a lot of the misunderstanding starts. Because since it is not a crime, the police should not be taking people to the centers and then treating them as criminals because it is not a crime. It's something different, and it is not a crime.

ALICE: Michelle, you mentioned earlier that a large portion of the folks you work with are disabled Latinx and undocumented. What are some of the things they're telling you?

MICHELLE: They have a lot of fear, and they're mental state, they have disabilities already, physical disabilities, and then you also have developmental and/or mental disabilities. Because also, they also come from a place of in their countries of origin, they have-- If here they don't have much services, they at least have some supports and services or access. But in their countries of origin, they have nothing because from their countries like Mexico or South and Central America, there's very little services available to people with disabilities. So, this weighs even more to go back to their countries of origin and be left just there, no services or no supports.

ALICE: Has this fear forced people to change the way they do things? Are people changing their activities and behaviors?

MICHELLE: Yes, most definitely. So, with the people that I work with and also people obviously in the group, unfortunately, many of them have opted of not going to their regular checkups at the doctors or going to get medication that they desperately need for diabetes of depression. Or treatments or going for therapy, they stop attending because of the same fear of having at least to go into these locations, like a hospital, clinic, so on and so forth, and having them be detained.

Access Living working with coalitions and law enforcement

ALICE: How has law enforcement in Chicago responded in terms of encouraging undocumented people to get out, to ask for help? There's a lot of people in law enforcement that keeping saying, "Oh, don't worry. We're not gonna report you." And yet, they still want people to report crimes and to go for assistance and health care. And yet, we've seen ICE round people up, wait for them in front of community centers.

Can you tell me a little bit about, I guess, Access Living and their working with coalitions and the outreach with ICE or with the law enforcement in Chicago?

MICHELLE: Yes, so, we are very happy 'cause just yesterday after a three-year or so or more of working with City officials, we were finally able to pass the Trust Act, which is [unclear] a

sanctuary, in the whole state, a sanctuary. 'Cause a few years ago, we were able to get Chicago to be sanctuary, but they were still not being, even you could still be detained depending on where you were. And they're also doing racial profiling. So, there's still that fear factor of going out and like going to the doctor or driving or whatever. Now, with Illinois being protected, we worked much more diligently and closely with the police departments so that this doesn't happen, not only in the city, but in the suburbs. Because in the suburbs, there's a large population of immigrant individuals with and without disability. There's a lot of people with disabilities that have visited the Centers for Independent Living, [unclear] a number have called us that they need services, but they're fearing going and asking for help even to their local police department as to where to go because of their status. So, now we can feel safe and say, "Well, you can contact this department, and they should not detain you or do anything." However, of course, there's always that question mark of whether they're doing it or not.

[cheery acoustic guitar]

Dealing with emotional aspects of living under this administration

ALICE: How about you, Alicia? How is the Spanish Speaking Citizens' Foundation helping folks deal with the emotional aspects of living under this current administration?

ALICIA: Well, the way we are coping with the stress is to try our best to create a place where immigrants feel welcome and where our programs help them to have a space where they can learn something and enjoy something. You know, I think that we humans can take only certain amount of stress, and I think that really what the administration is trying to do is to create more fear. And what we're doing is our best to help our community understand well, you know, the reality is that things are not easy, but we must stay together and keep moving forward.

[bright music]

Moving forward

ALICE: So, how do you move forward?

ALICIA: I think that there is a lot of need to find ways to connect different movements. One thing that I think the conference where you and I saw each other last time, one thing that make it unique is that I think it's the first time that there is a conference where there is a combination of the Latinx and the disabled movement.

ALICE: What do you think, Michelle? What do you do to move forward?

MICHELLE: Well, I think that now, it's more of that trust and that cohesiveness of collaboration among the communities. 'Cause I think that they want us to be divided, especially now, more than ever. And we shouldn't be divided. I think, if anything, we should come together and fight and resist. I know I might sound like a cliché, but it's true. I think we have to trust in each other and support each other and make sure that we understand that what happens to you, happens to me. And I think what happens is that a lot of the community partners or groups, you find out that they're really they're groups, and they do awesome work. But then, when we--as in groups that work with disability--they don't see us as part of. So, we kind of have to push ourselves into those. Like, "No, I'm a part of the movement too. I'm affected by this too." So, when this happens, when we've been able to break through per se, I've seen genuine like, "Oh, thank you. We didn't realize that it actually affects you the same as us." So, I think that's critical that, in the moments like this where we're all fighting, we're not fighting for our own selves. We have to be fighting for all of us together.

Wrap-up

[acoustic guitar]

ALICE: If you want to learn more about Alicia's organization, the East Bay Spanish Speaking Citizens' Foundation, you can go to their website: sscf.org.

If you want to learn more about Access Living, the organization Michelle works at, go to: accessliving.org.

You should also check out the National Coalition for Latinxs with Disabilities at: latinxdisabilitycoalition.com.

["Dance Off" hip hop song]

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Adios.

♪ Rock it to the blast off

Stop drop dance off ♪